

Barred Owl

Strix varia



The Barred Owl is widespread in North America, occurring across most of the eastern half of the continent from Florida northward to southern Canada. The northern part of the range is expanding westward.

The Barred Owl is a medium-sized gray-brown owl with a length of about 1-1/2 to 2 feet and a weight of about 22 oz. for males and 28 oz. for females. Wingspan is from 40–50 inches and body length ranges from 17–24 inches. The Barred Owl is named for the feather patterns, which are barred with the alternating colors of white and brown, located on its head, chest and back. There is no difference in plumage between males and the larger females.

The Barred Owl is a resident species and does not migrate. Although many species of owls are strictly nocturnal, the Barred Owl is sometimes active during the day. Their life span can exceed 10 years in the wild, and captive birds have been known to live as long as 23 years. Great Horned Owls are their only natural enemy.

Barred Owls prefer dense moist forests, wooded swamps, and woodlands near waterways. They need a relatively open understory, which is necessary so that they can perch on branches and be able to see, as well as fly, to catch their prey. Pair territories range from 200-900 acres, depending on the availability of suitable habitat and a good prey base.

The availability of perch sites has been found to be an important factor in habitat selection. The most important factor in selection of a breeding territory appears to be the amount of large trees, usually with trunk diameters larger than 20 inches.

The Barred Owl is a very opportunistic hunter, taking whatever is available and within its power to overwhelm. Most of the hunting is nocturnal, but they do hunt during the day, especially during breeding season.

Barred Owls hunt by perching on branches while seeking prey and then diving down for the catch. One hunting behavior is the bobbing of the head while watching prey. The bobbing motion is a vertical movement of the owl's head in an up and down manner, which aids it in determining the distance to the prey.

In its northern range, its diet is mostly small mammals with a good percentage of birds. In southern swamps, the Barred Owl consumes crayfish in greater abundance than small mammals. Bats and large insects are also on the menu., and the owls swoop down into shallow water to catch frogs, snakes, small turtles and occasionally small fish.

This variety of prey illustrates the owl's adaptability to live on whatever food source is available. If the prey is small enough, the owl swallows it whole. If swallowed whole, the owls later regurgitate pellets of the indigestible parts such as bones and fur. Larger prey is carried to a feeding perch and torn apart before eating.

Vocalizations can be heard day or night throughout the year. Males use two different calls. One call sounds like a deep barking call that increases in volume, and ends with a powerful hoot. This call is believed to be a signal of

aggression by the owl. The second call is used to state its territory and to attract mates. This call has a more rhythmic sound or pattern, much like the phrase "Who cooks for you, who cooks for you all." Many other vocalizations are made which range from a short yelp or bark to a frenzied and raucous monkey-like squall. Mates will duet, and the male's voice is deeper and mellower.

In Florida, courtship activities begin in February with breeding occurring in March and April. Males hoot and females give contact calls. As the nesting season approaches, males chase females, giving a variety of hooting and screeching calls. They display by swaying back and forth and raising their wings while sidling along a branch. Courtship feeding and mutual preening also occur.

Barred Owls are mostly cavity nesters but they will use abandoned hawk, squirrel, or crow nests. Two to three white eggs, almost perfectly round, are laid every two to three days and incubation begins with the first egg laid. The incubation period is 28-33 days. During this time, the male brings food to the female while she is on the nest. The Barred Owl is single-brooded but has a long breeding season, which allows for laying of replacement clutches if the first clutch or brood is lost.

When the young leave the nest, at about four weeks, they are not able to fly. They crawl out of the nest using their beaks and talons to sit on branches. They fledge one to two weeks later. Once they lose their down, there is no difference between adult and juvenile plumage.

Parents care for the young for at least four months, much longer than most other owls. Young tend to disperse very short distances, usually less than six miles, before settling. Pairs mate for life and territories and nest sites are maintained for many years.

